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ABSTRACT

The Declaration of Independence is the founding document of the United States. It is part of the social studies core curriculum in U.S. schools. By the time they graduate from high school, students are expected to know the main ideas in the Declaration of Independence and their significance. This digest discusses: (1) the origins of the Declaration of Independence; (2) the structure and key ideas of the document; (3) how to teach the document; and (4) World Wide Web sites about the document for teachers and students. (Contains 12 references.) (BT)

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Teaching the Declaration of Independence

By John J. Patrick

The Declaration of Independence is the founding document of the United States of America. It is part of the social studies core curriculum in schools throughout the United States. Students, by the time they graduate from high school, are expected to know the main ideas in the Declaration of Independence and their significance in the American heritage. This Digest discusses (1) the origins of the Declaration of Independence, (2) the structure and key ideas of the document, (3) how to teach the document, and (4) World Wide Web sites on the document for teachers and learners.

Origins of the Declaration of Independence. During June and July of 1776, the main question facing the Second Continental Congress at Philadelphia revolved around independence: should the American colonies represented at this Congress declare their separation and freedom from the United Kingdom of Great Britain? After intense debate, the delegates voted on July 2, 1776 in favor of Richard Henry Lee's resolution for independence. On July 4, the Congress discussed and approved, with a few changes, the formal Declaration of Independence written by Thomas Jefferson on behalf of a five-person committee appointed by Congress (Maier 1997; McClellan 1989).

During July and August 1776, the Declaration of Independence was printed and distributed throughout the newly proclaimed United States of America. Americans recognized immediately that this document expressed widely held ideas about the proper purposes of government and the rights of individuals. George Mason expressed the same ideas about government and rights in similar words in Articles I-III of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, which was drafted and approved a few weeks before the Declaration of Independence. Many years later Jefferson acknowledged that the Declaration of Independence was "intended to be an expression of the American mind" and not an original or innovative statement (Schechter 1990, 138-145; Spalding 2002, 79).

Structure and Key Ideas. The Declaration of Independence can be divided into four main parts. The first part is an introduction that states the purpose of the document, which was to explain why the American people were declaring independence from the government of Great Britain.

The second part is a theory of good government and individual rights generally accepted by Americans from the 1770s until today. In this theory, all individuals are equal in their possession of certain immutable rights. These rights are not granted by the government. Rather, they are inherent to human nature. Therefore, the first purpose of a good government is to secure or protect these rights. Further, a good government is based on the consent of the governed—the people—who are the sole source of the government's authority. If their government persistently violates this theory of good government, then the people have the right to overthrow it.

The third part of the document is a list of grievances against King George III, who was singled out to represent the actions of the British government. These grievances are examples of actions that violated the criteria for good government stated in the second part of the Declaration of Independence. These grievances, therefore, justify separation from the King's bad government and establishment of a good government to replace it.

The fourth and final part of the document is an unqualified assertion of sovereignty by the United States of America. It proclaims the determination of Americans to defend and maintain their independence and rights.

Teaching Strategies. The main ideas of the Declaration of Independence are essential to a good education for citizenship in the United States. These ideas are common cords of civic identity by which unity is forged and maintained among the diverse ethnic, religious, and racial groups within the United States. Following are five strategies for teaching the Declaration of Independence through the social studies curriculum in schools.

1. Introduce core ideas of the Declaration of Independence to students in grades four and five; at these grades they typically study state history and United States history. Return to the core ideas of the document in cycles of increasing complexity and depth in middle school and high school courses in United States history and world history.

2. Teach the document in the context of the American War of Independence and the founding of the United States of America (Berns 1985).

3. Connect ideas in the document to events and issues in different periods of United States history from the founding era to the present. For example, relate the idea of "unalienable rights" to the abolitionist movement of the 1830s and 1840s, to the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, and to the causes and consequences of the Civil War (Jaffa 2000). Connect ideas in the Declaration of Independence to struggles for equal justice under law of the civil rights movement of African Americans and to the women's rights movement (Pyne and Sesso 1995).

4. Connect ideas in the document to events and issues in modern world history that pertain to the advancement of democracy and human rights in different parts of the world. For example, examine the influence of the Declaration of Independence on the democratic revolutions in various countries during the 19th and 20th centuries. Show the influence of the Declaration of Independence on the Preamble of the 1948 "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" of the United Nations. Finally, examine with the students the impact of ideas in the Declaration of Independence on the worldwide human rights movement, which began in the latter half of the 20th century (Adler 1987).

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5. Discuss with students the global prospects for democracy and individual rights predicted by Thomas Jefferson in 1826, the year of the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. On June 24, 1826, Jefferson wrote, "May it be to the world what I believe it will be, to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all, the signal . . . to assume the blessings and security of self-government . . . All eyes are opened or opening to the rights of man" (Schechter 1990, 448). Investigate with students events in the global history of democracy and human rights that exemplify Jefferson's prediction. Speculate with students about the prospects for democracy and human rights in the 21st century. Finally, emphasize that the Declaration of Independence has global significance because it set a standard for liberty and justice under law to which all people in the world may aspire.

World Wide Web Sites. Resources for teaching and learning about the Declaration of Independence and events and documents related to it are available at the following Web sites:

U.S. Founding Documents This site, a project of the law school of Emory University, includes copies of the Declaration of Independence and related documents of the founding era.
www.law.emory.edu/FEDERAL/

National Archives and Records Administration: Digital Classroom, Teaching with Documents This site contains reproducible copies of primary documents and teaching activities based on documents pertaining to periods of U.S. history from the American Revolution to the present.
www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/teaching_with_documents.html

The Founders' Almanac: Primary Documents of the Founding This site, established by the Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC, introduces and explains the Declaration of Independence and other great documents of the American founding era.
www.heritage.org/research/features/almanac/documents.html

The American Revolution and Its Era, 1750-1789 This site from the Library of Congress American Memory collections contains documents about the founding of the United States.
lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/collections/revolt/index.html

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; World Wide Web <edrs.com>; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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